Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis **ISSN: 2582-7391**
A Multidisciplinary Publication of Centre for Research
Maitreyi College, University of Delhi
April 2024, Volume 5 Issue 1

Original Research Article

Critical Theory and Social Transformation: Reflections on the 'Empowerment' of the 'Subject'

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Received: 22nd December, 2023; Accepted: 15th March, 2024; Published: 30th April, 2024

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to discuss the limitations of empowerment. Contemporary research and discussions have focussed on transforming development as a process for social inclusion. From the standpoint of critical theory, it is important to understand the deep structure of the processes of social inclusion. From this perspective, the paper will look at the housing sector to understand the social inclusion of women, marginalised labour, and victims of violence. The research is based on the content analysis of the film Zara Hatke Zara Bachke, case studies of victims of violence from Jharia, Jharkhand, and discourse analysis of the mass production of low-income housing in India. The conceptual vocabulary for this analysis draws upon the works of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Christopher Alexander. Foucault in his work 'Orders of Discourse' critiques the proposition that 'knowledge empowers.' He raises the question of orders of discourses to understand how human agency is hegemonised by knowledge. Louis Althusser in his work 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' argues that individuals becomes citizens only on the condition that they agree to be governed. Christopher Alexander in his work, 'The Production of Houses' has argued that to acquire one's own agency to limit the power structures, it is important to make one's own home within limited resources. This vocabulary highlights the deep structures of the violence of social inclusion. This paper attempts to explore the nature and scope of the methodology of social inclusion. An important aspect of this methodology is that marginalised individuals are objects of research that are fixed in a frame by the gaze of a researcher. The intersubjectivity between the researcher and the researched is denied because of which their tangible-intangible needs, wants, and desires are rendered null and void.

Keywords: Social Inclusion, Subject-Object, Making, Empowerment, Tangible-Intangible, Housing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today housing has become a site for hope and despair. The landscape of hope constructed in the pretext of development is full of violence. Violence, whose deep structure lies in suffering and grief. A few instances of suffering and grief include riots, the holocaust, and identity crises but the site where suffering and grief are internalised and tangibly observed is 'a house.' However, the house is also a site where a sense of community is nurtured with care.

Ironically, this field has often been studied by town planners, policymakers, and architects only. It was mostly never studied by social sciences and humanities. Thus, this article attempts to critically engage with housing as a site for the inclusive cumulative social transformations initiated by capitalist industrial development (Polanyi, 2002, p. 38-62). It is at this site where we can see how development processes have over time separated the home from the house. Resultantly, this created the problem of where-ness and fractured the relation between being and belonging. This gives rise to the birth of the 'subject.'

To give a brief overview, this article is divided into four parts. The first part of the article discusses how the separation of the house from the home created the question of 'where-ness.' The second part discusses violence of hope and creative labour through three case studies. The third part deals with the question of homelessness, where the relation between being and belonging is fractured. The fourth part focuses on the whereness concerning the subject of social transformation. Hence, the housing question from this perspective becomes critical for a re-examination of the 'subject' in theories of social transformation.

2. HOUSING AND THE WHERE-NESS QUESTION!

The housing question has its historic origins in the dis-embedding of the economy from society. With this dis-embedding, 'where' emerged as a part of an infinite horizon. Henri Lefebvre (2012, p.181) drawing attention to the texture of these relations asks,

> "….Could the infinite and the finite be mere illusion, one just as much as the other, and each, as it were, the illusion *of* the other? Are they mirages, reflections, or refractions, or in some sense that which lies short of and beyond each part? Time *per se* Lefebvre is an absurdity; likewise space per se…"

Historically, this illusion existed alongside the dis-embedding of the industrial economy from society in the course of creating time and space for the first phase of industrial development. During this phase, the 'where' of the workplace (the site for infinite hope) was separated from the 'where' of the house (the site for being and belonging). The 'where' concerning this infinite horizon designates unique specificities of space namely, place and time (the historical circumstance, the contingent life situations, social context, the cultural ethos, and the ambiance). This illusion escalated during the post-industrial development phase. This happened by the dis-embedding of the home from the house.

3. DIS-EMBEDDING OF THE WORKPLACE FROM THE HOUSE

During the first phase of industrialisation, which lasted up to the 1970s, investments were made in infrastructure for the production of goods and services. This included the building of dams, railways, roads, airports, heavy steel industries, education institutions, scientific establishments, and so on.

People migrated from rural homes to wherever education, jobs, health care, and so on were geographically feasible**.** In this situation, the questions were, where is one going to live in an alien place of work? Where will the requirements for social responsibilities be obtained from? and where are these complex sites to be constructed in space?

These 'where' questions were coming from a person's sense of being in the world. Which was constructed with belongings that included socially, culturally, and religiously acceptable material things for subsistence. The problem of where-ness varied according to the being and belongings of vegetarians and non-vegetarians; of the religious and the secular; the rich and the poor, and so on.

These two aspects of the 'where' questions contributed to the development of the service sector, which initially was a network of local markets close to people's residences.

4. DIS-EMBEDDING OF THE HOME FROM THE HOUSE

During the post-industrial development phase, the service sector of the economy enlarged to produce homogenised goods that could be delivered efficiently. This escalated the severity of the where-ness question. It has three dimensions:

First, it gave birth to a weightless economy, that included products like serviceable, non-serviceable, non-material goods, and nothing. Second, the making of this weightless economy destroyed the places and things that were identified by their respective historical, social, and cultural specifics of time and place. Third, it integrated markets and residential places through symbolic and technological flows to create infrastructures.

These three dimensions became visible when the where-ness question dislocated masses, disturbed semiotic configurations, and damaged heritage landscapes. Ultimately, this resulted in the emergence of a weighty burdensome homelessness problem. Consequently, being in the world and its belongings lost their 'whereabouts!' This lost dimension of homogenisation articulated the illusory relation between the finite and the infinite. The illusory relation created by the weightless economy produced four types of homogenous 'nothings' as conceptualised by Ritzer (2007). These are non-place, non-things, non-people, and non-services.

Non-places refer to sites such as shopping malls, chain hotels, airport departure lounges, fast-food outlets, café franchises, theme parks, and so on. The uses and experiences of non-places are standard, regardless of whether they are situated in India, Canada, or China.

Non-things include global brands in clothing, mass-produced foods, coffee, and so on.

Non-people refers to people who are part of those jobs that take a growing employment share in fast-moving contemporary economies. These are 'junk jobs' with highly routinised services and manufacturing. These include jobs as call center jobs, and so on.

Non-services refers to those services that are exemplified by various types of self-service. These include automated teller machines (ATMs), automated telephone systems, Internet shopping, and so on.

The infrastructure (including high-speed highways, railways, large hydroelectric dams, massive airports, shopping malls, and so on) and the production of 'nothings,' homogenised time and space by levelling forests, cementing river pathways, fencing cultural heritage sites, circumscribing village settlements, cutting mountain side, and so on. These activities led to the growth of knowledge elites and a cultural mass which in turn led to the birth of a widened idea of class from relations of production to the relations between decision-makers. Under these conditions labour flexibility and cognitive reflexivity, which were associated with production, were separated from the associated aesthetic reflexivity.

Due to this, the idea of homogenised time and space emerged. The major instance of it is visible in the arrangements of 'work from home.' The purpose of this arrangement was to act as the pivot for integrating market infrastructures and residential places through symbolic and technological flows. As this infrastructure grew, there was a shift from the methods of socially creating knowledge to technologies for gathering information for further privatising data. For instance;

> "The Microsoft worker, meanwhile, produces software that enables her to 'work from home,' in the nice catchphrase of the time; she can even consume other immaterial goods (music, images, information) while she's at work. As an exemplary post-Fordist object, the personal computer collapses the spatial distance between work and home, and the temporal separation of work and consumption. (Tonkiss, 2006, p.119)"

Through this, 'Work from home' converted a house as the site for the shift from knowledge to information. This arrangement further led to the birth of a new kind of reflexivity that

structured new forms of production, consumption, and exchange. This included information warehouses for the collection, the storage of data used for feedback on consumer behaviour to improve consumption, and production. The information gathered helps to evaluate problems faced by consumers for updating the features of their products and customise production, thus ultimately customising exchange. The platforms that are used to collect the information are YouTube, Instagram, and so on.

The new types of products that help to serve and sustain 'work from home' were non–material (cognitive and aesthetic) goods and nothing. Some critics have called non-material products the leading factor for the emergence of the weightless economy, which did not have a stable physical form. Thus, the site of 'work from home' housed all these for 'nothing.'

Here, the finite and the infinite were disembodied from each other. On the infinite horizon, hope was replaced by hopelessness due to the homogenisation of finite 'nothings.' Resultantly, this fractured the agency of being in the world. This led to the birth of the subject. Hence, damaged the sense of belonging.

On the finite horizon, concerning industrialisation, the illusion of hope contributed to making finite things meaningful, crafting a being, and shaping a sense of belonging. Here the question of where-ness emerged when the unique specificities of time and place were diluted, destabilised, and rendered null-void. Hence, things became nothing, the being of a person became emasculated, and the sense of belonging was damaged irreparably. Such is the violence of hope.

5. MITIGATING VIOLENCE OF HOPE

These horizons of the where-ness question created conditions for hostility. The infrastructure destroyed the hospitality of historical people, dislocated social, and disregarded cultural specifics of time and place. It also abetted riots, pogroms, genocide, ethnocide, ecocide, poverty domestic violence, and more.

All this rendered people homeless. Several million who had a house could not make a home because the concerns and questions of the world outside the house impacted the life of people inside the house. Here multiculturalism, human rights, and gender questions mediate the relations between members.

In this regard, Bauman (1989, ch.4) quotes Norbert Elias;

> "Violence is no longer a perpetual insecurity that it brings into the life of the individual, but a peculiar form of security... a continuous, uniform pressure is exerted on individual life by physical violence stored behind the scenes of everyday life, a pressure totally familiar but hardly perceived, conduct and drive economy having been adjusted from earliest youth to social structure."

This hostile sense of security dis-embedded (Granovetter, 2018, p. 22-45) the home from the house. In this situation, the question arises, where does one get a house to make a home? and where does one find a home when the house becomes hostile?

To further understand the contours of the violence of hope, three instances are discussed. These include the content analysis of the film 'Zara Hatke Zara Bachke'(Bollywood Film), discourse analysis of 'Jharia Coalmines'(Documentary), and text study of 'Mexicali.'

6. ZARA HATKE ZARA BACHKE: WHERE IS THE HOUSE TO LIVE?

The narrative of *Zara Hatke Zara Bachke* unfolds many layers. These include the complexity of the relationship between a house and the empowerment of the subject. In this film, the eligibility rules favour a deprived woman. This compels the couple Kapil and Soumya to get a divorce to get a house. In divorce, the negative dialectics of the subject unfold when Soumya, who has acquired a home has to give it up to restore harmony in the social institution of family and marriage.

In *Zara Hatke Zara Bachke* there are three orders of discourse concerning marriage, housing, and one's agency. In each of these, the subject exercises free will only within the frame of rules and regulations. Here, there is a contradiction between the stability of social institutions and the requirements of public policy. Instead of creating a site for healing and community life, it further deepens the cracks of violence. These are instances of the Deleuzian (2017, pp. 35-39). understanding of failed institutions.

7. JHARIA COAL MINES: IS THERE A PLACE TO HAVE HOUSE?

At Jharia coal mines in Jharkhand, informal labour is a 'subject.' For the past 30 years, more than 70, 000 families have been rendered homeless on account of coal mines. In the Bastakola area, they were then given jobs in these coal mines as a token of compensation. They lived in temporary settlements on the surface below which there was burning coal.

After some time, around 4000 families were rehabilitated in Belgadia, Dhanbad. These houses were neither adequately equipped nor appropriately designed. On the one hand, these houses couldn't become homes. On the other hand, the large majority of lower caste people who were not rehabilitated were forced to live in temporary settlements. Geeta Devi, a resident of Bastakola, says "There is no dignity of life, for us lower caste."

In contrast, the rehabilitated ones in Belgadia were living in constant fear of fragile arrangements. Along with it, they were deprived of basic facilities like water, jobs, electricity, and so on. Arun Yadav, a beneficiary of the rehabilitation scheme said, "They are living in constant fear of being buried on account of the crumbling of these fragile arrangements."

8. MEXICALI PROJECT: CAN WE MAKE OUR OWN HOUSE?

An excellent example of creative labour is the Mexicali Project by Christopher Alexander (1985, Vol. 4). described in his work 'The Production of Houses.'

The Production of Houses focuses on a group of buildings that Alexander and his associates built in 1976 in northern Mexico. The book explains how each family helped to lay out and construct its own home according to their family's own needs.

Mexicali is an instance of creative labour, that has ensured on the one hand an individual's sense of well-being is respected and on the other hand the collective sense of community is upheld.

In the last part of the book, there is a discussion on the Shift of Paradigm. It elaborates on the devastating nature of the revolution in the worldview and its overall implications for deep-seated cultural change.

9. THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATIVE LABOUR

Zara Hatke Zara Bachke and Jharia show that in relation to the 'housing question,' the subject emerges as a one-dimensional person. In this regard Engels (1935, Vol. 23, part III). in his work states,

> "In reality the bourgeoisie has only one method of solving the housing question in a way the solution continually reproduces the question a new. This method is called Haussman."

Thus, one can observe a decline and degeneration of human agency. Here, the subject is disempowered and subjected to hegemony that takes away from them the basic conditions to live. Here, housing emerges as a site for the subject's right to live, which is sheltered from hostile and violent physical, social, and economic conditions.

In contrast to Mexicali, in the two previous cases, the people were deprived of belonging which rendered them homeless and uprooted. Therefore, the material culture of a home has a deep relationship with one's sense of belonging to a place and time.

10. WHERE IS THE 'SUBJECT' OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION?

The subject of social transformation has its origin in the transition from pre-industrial to feudal social order to capitalist industrial society. It was hoped that the transformation of the political economy (the Industrial Revolution) will equip the subject with the public use of reason and open an infinite horizon of freedom, equality, and fraternity (the ideals of the French Revolution). Is the hope in the mind only? Or is it where the being of an individual resides and creative labour is possible? Residence occurs when the belonging of a person is in creative relation with the being in the world. Here, residence is more than a physical space. This is illustrated in the instance of Mexicali.

Critical theory (Frankfurt School and beyond) needs to pay attention to the role played by 'residence' in the making of enlightened subjects (Kant, 2013, p. 4) enchanted by instrumental rationality. Foucault argued that knowledge (the basis of an enlightened subject) generates several orders of discourse that ensure compliance with rules. Althusser (2014, ch.12) argued that one becomes a Subject only to become a subject of state ideology. Together, according to Foucault (1971, p. 7-30) and Althusser, this dual character of the subject is a significant aspect of modernity.

The critical approach of the Frankfurt school talks about basic conceptual problems in development. Most importantly they draw attention to the fact that the agency acquired through capabilities is a dehumanisation of social relationships and of society itself. Most notably the arguments given by Horkheimer, Adorno (1997, Vol. 15), and Marcuse (2013, ch. 5) point in this direction. This is a complete reflection on human agency which has become nothing. According to Antonio Negri, this could be conceptualised as an 'Ontological Decline (2009, p. xxiii).'

Here, the question is, does the subject's agency for social transformation contribute to enriching the relationship between being and belonging? Where did the enlightened subject become a one-dimensional person (Marcuse, 2013, ch. 7) (alienated from itself and from the world it inhabits)? Where was the subject disciplined by the state? Is it where the being in the house and the workplace were separated?

In this context, Lefebvre (2012, p. 181) points out,

> "When the subject-a city or a people-suffers dispersal, the building and its functions come into their own; by the same token, housing comes to prevail over residence within that city or amidst that people."

In other words, when people suffer dispersal (for instance, on account of the industrial separation of home from the place of work), the infinite horizon of freedom, equality, and

fraternity is dispersed. Here, housing prevails over residence. This is illustrated in the film *Zara Hatke Zara Bachke* and Jharia coal mines.

This neglect of the question of 'residence' resonates in the work of Foucault (1971, p. 7-30) and Althusser (2014, ch.12). This raises another question to enquire;

Of what significance is residence to this dual character of the subject?

The question of agency here cannot be fully understood without addressing the crises in the relationship between being and belonging created by homelessness. Hence, the homeless subject wanders infinitely. Here, the subject is an individual who is disempowered and is subjected to hegemony which takes away from them the basic conditions necessary to make choices for their own life.

Homelessness is a new product that creates the subject in post-industrial society. Being deprived of a house is an absolute deprivation. Here there is a complete decline and degeneration of human agency.

Homelessness further triggers social differences that escalate into conflict and ultimately to violence. This fractures the social spaces of being and belonging. This is because the being of a person which includes their sense of identity, place, and time is deeply connected with a person's belonging which includes a sense of home and community.

To have a home is not a luxury but a necessity. The house is one of the sites where the relationship between being and belonging is fostered. All capability is meaningless if it does not enable the middle class to exercise their agency to fulfill their dream of a house. This raises another question to investigate, what is the violence of this dream?

From the standpoint of critical theory, homelessness is the breaking point of social transformation that is characterised by the exercise of human agency to dis-embed the economic institutions from the social institutions. Homelessness is where the dis-embedded (Granovetter, 2018, p. 22-45) subject is tangibly observed!

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to convey my gratitude to my teachers, family, and friends for all the critical support.

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How to cite this article: Saud, H. (2024).Critical Theory and Social Transformation: Reflections on the ‘empowerment’ of the ‘subject’. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis, 5*(1), 26-33

DOI: https://doi.org/10.52253/vjta.2024.v05i01.04

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